



# Signs of an Inclusive School: A Parent's Perspective on the Meaning and Value of Authentic Inclusion

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## Abstract

Although increasing numbers of schools say they are adopting inclusive models of service delivery, many students with significant disabilities continue to experience segregation and isolation in school settings. This article, written from a parent's perspective, highlights a series of questions that school leadership, educators, and families can ask themselves in reflecting on whether their schools offer authentically inclusive experiences. Included are strategies and ideas that schools have used with this parent's child to create and strengthen academically and socially inclusive educational opportunities for all students.

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## Keywords

inclusion, school community, modifications, inclusive strategies, significant disabilities

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After watching my daughter with developmental disabilities participate in inclusive classrooms for the past 10 years in five different schools, I am still amazed that a debate exists on whether inclusion is a good idea. Sure, she has encountered classmates who have given her a hard time and some staff who were wary of her presence in their class. But the many positives—like watching her leave for a year-end school trip to New York City for a week and seeing her watercolor on display at the Gallery Exhibition of her high school’s Fine Arts Week—have erased any doubts I have had.

When glancing at the dozens of notes from classmates in her yearbook as the school year ended, I notice that many of them start with a sentence like, “Biology was a blast...” or “I’m glad you were in my English class....” To me, the benefits of an inclusive experience, even for children with significant disabilities, are obvious: sharing important life experiences with all the other kids; learning important skills, like how to budget for the gift shop on a field trip and how to avoid the busiest time at the cafeteria during lunch; getting opportunities to be recognized for your contributions; and—maybe most important—having fun.

But recently, parents of children with disabilities on several state and nationwide listservs have been the ones leading the charge in advocating for specialized schools and separate programs. As a friend said to me, “I can understand why some families would want their child to be Homecoming King or go to prom in a separate place where they feel valued instead of always being on the outside.” The “inclusion” many

families have experienced has not been *genuinely* inclusive and they are opting for separate programs that they believe will be more welcoming.

It may be time once again to revisit the definition of inclusion. Students with disabilities who are unwelcome, not encouraged to participate, and share only physical space with their peers are not having an “inclusive” experience. No wonder so many families—and some professionals—are saying inclusion has failed, especially for our students with significant disabilities. I have visited schools that proudly proclaim they are fully inclusive when students with obvious disabilities are sitting apart from their classmates with an adult most of their day, are absent from after-school and extracurricular activities, and ride separate buses to and from school. These students may be present in their school, but do they have a *presence*?

Authentic inclusion requires as much focus on communication, interaction, and relationship-building as it does on curriculum modifications and accommodations. Important components of inclusion include intentional planning, teamwork and team planning time, interactive and hands-on ways of exploring subject content, a truly flexible curriculum, and commitment from school leadership to support staff with the time, resources, training and vision necessary to implement inclusive practices. Leadership support for high-quality and continuous professional development also is critical in equipping school staff for a very different way of teaching than most of us experienced when we were in school. Most importantly, students with and without disabilities need

**The “inclusion” many families have experienced has not been genuinely inclusive and they are opting for separate programs that they believe will be more welcoming.**

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*opportunities*—opportunities to participate together, interact, and contribute across school environments.

Here are some questions to ask yourself about your own school’s effectiveness in

providing inclusive, meaningful learning experiences for all children, both with and without disabilities.

### Figure 1: Questions to Ask About Inclusive School Experiences

Here are some questions to ask yourself about your own school’s effectiveness in providing inclusive, meaningful learning experiences for all students, both with and without disabilities:

*In the Classroom:*

- Are all students sitting together? Are any particular students isolated or alone with an adult?
- Are all students asked for responses and encouraged to participate in class activities?
- Are there a variety of ways for students to participate in activities?
- Is there evidence of active learning?
- Are all students working in the same curriculum at varying levels of complexity?
- Are students supporting each other?
- Does each member of the teaching team express ownership for all students?

*In the School Building:*

- Do all students feel they are part of a community?
- Are related services integrated into regular activities throughout the school day?
- Are all students actively encouraged to be part of and actually engaged in extracurriculars and social events at school?
- Does every student have opportunities to share gifts, talents, passions?
- Do IEP meetings actively involve students and include time to reflect on student success while incorporating student interest and strengths into the present level and goals?

*In the School District...*

- Do the district’s building principals understand and support inclusive principles?
- Do school leaders provide the resources and flexibility necessary to support inclusive practices?
- Do school leaders see how inclusive practices fit into overall school improvement and school redesign efforts?

#### **In the Classroom**

1. *Are all students sitting together? Are any particular students isolated or alone with an adult?*

Too often, children with disabilities are seated by themselves alongside a paraprofessional and work with an adult for group activities. Paraprofessionals can often be great in facilitating communication between students, but should not take the place of

peers (Causton-Theoharis & Malmgren, 2005). Sometimes, adults have to get the ball rolling: forming a lunch bunch or assigning students to groups to make sure no one is left out. But in truly inclusive schools, all students have a valued role in the classroom. In middle and high school, students with significant disabilities may have a distinct and meaningful role, such as being the timekeeper in a group project or narrator using a commu-

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nication device in a skit or presentation. They may do a physical part of an experiment in science class while other students collect data or take notes. This is also true for younger students. For example, a student with a disability may be responsible for organizing equipment for a science experiments or using a communication device to call out spelling words during tests. Think of how these participatory roles can meet a student's individual social, academic, or communication IEP goals. Other classmates often have the most creative ideas about ways their peers with disabilities can contribute in meaningful ways. In one of my daughter's first high school classes, she was initially paired with a special educator for team work. After talking with the staff about our expectations, the two teachers who led the class began grouping her with other students for all projects. Usually, the team of students decided what role each member would take. This class became both one of her favorites for the year and one in which she met and interacted with the most students.

**Teachers may need to rely more heavily on instructional formats and strategies that are rich with response opportunities.**

2. *Are all students asked for responses and encouraged to participate in class activities?*

Meaningful student engagement has consistently been linked to having numerous opportunities to respond during instruction (Sutherland & Wehby, 2001). This is true for all students, not just those with disabilities. This means that teachers may need to rely more heavily on instructional formats and strategies that are rich with response opportunities. For children who do not speak, school teams, classmates, and families can work to-

gether to develop other ways to communicate (e.g., yes/no responses, head nods, PECS picture symbols, pre-programmed responses on an assistive technology device).

Every part of a school day can offer opportunities to make choices and provide input: at lunch time, students can be asked whether they will eat hot or cold; whether they want white milk or chocolate; whether they like hot dogs or not. Teachers do not have to do it alone; other students can get involved. Classmates can ask a student with disabilities to answer questions or can be paired together for a short activity in which a child makes choices, presses a Big Mac but-

ton with pre-recorded content, or responds from an array of options on a pre-programmed communication device. Students in middle and high school can be asked either/or and yes/no questions about class content: Does the neutron or electron hold a negative charge? Is Othello a comedy or a tragedy? Younger students can be asked in music class which song to

sing first among several choices; in gym, they can be asked which exercise to do first. Providing choices and opportunities builds self-esteem and independence, as well as promoting the message that everyone has a contribution to make. Such choice-making opportunities are also critical to fostering self-determination in all students (Wehmeyer et al., 2007).

3. *Are there a variety of ways for students to participate in activities?*

Students with short-term memory and communication challenges often do best with a limited choice of answers rather than open-ended questions (e.g. "Who is this

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story about, John or Terry?” “Did it have a happy or a sad ending?”). The same is true for students who can read independently but have trouble with open-ended writing. Assignments, tests, and quizzes can be given orally, options can be simplified (e.g., true/false, yes/no), responses can be provided using an assistive technology device, or they can be project-oriented (e.g. designing a poster or work of art to illustrate the meaning of a book.) Most of my daughter’s quizzes and tests use true/false or multiple choice formats. Often, a final exam involves a project or presentation. She writes simple sentences that she attaches to photos in PowerPoint, then reads the sentences during presentations. For students who do not read, content can be presented in symbols (Boardmaker) or cut-out magazine photos. There are a number of websites that offer classic novels in read-aloud formats for free download (see <http://librivox.org/>).

All these accommodations can be included in the IEP. Curriculum expectations can be greatly modified depending both on the student’s ability level and on the specific IEP goals (Cushing, Clark, Carter, & Kennedy, 2005). Academic content is not the only goal of school. Students can work on communication and social goals in biology when they are doing a lab project with peers. They can practice turn-taking during gym class or at recess while playing a cooperative game. Learning how to pay attention, wait for a turn, and follow classroom behavioral norms are important life skills.

#### *4. Is there evidence of active learning?*

Students should be doing more work than the teachers through group activities, discussion, hands-on experimentation and exploration. Research suggests that many of us—adults and children, people with disabili-

ties and those without—learn better by engaging multiple senses through practice instead of simply by listening (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2007). Most years, my daughter’s classroom seating is arranged so students can work together, rather than having all desks face the teacher. She has been offered multiple ways to demonstrate what she knows: posters, skits, written essays and papers; art work, PowerPoints and audio or video tapes of an interview. In many classes, final projects include a range of options. Another student may write a seven-page reflection paper, while she illustrates a book cover with main themes from a novel. Most of her work has been modified so that she can do it herself, with a group, or with the support of a peer tutor. She had two peer tutors through the schools’ established peer tutoring program who worked with her at lunch and after school during her freshman year. Both became close friends as well as great supports for homework and other assignments.

#### *5. Are all students working in the same curriculum at varying levels of complexity?*

The promise of effective inclusion is that all students will learn at least some elements of the same content, driven by state standards outlining student competencies by grade level. A few years ago, overhearing that I needed to look something up, my then-fourth grade daughter yelled up the stairs to me, “Google it.” (I actually hadn’t thought of that.) Why did she think of Googling? That is what her classroom teacher was showing all the kids to do as a pre-cursor to beginning a research paper. Her paper was considerably shorter and simpler than her classmates’. But she could learn to Google certain words for content and pictures, which she now does regularly for a variety of school assignments and other projects.

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Likewise, in eighth grade, she did a careers unit with her classmates. Everyone completed a resume (hers was simplified), dressed for success, did a mock interview, and took tours of the local university and technical college. She began the unit saying that after high school, she planned to get a job. After spending time listening to classmates, she changed her plans to, "I'm going to college." Her own expectations for herself were elevated because of hearing what her typical peers' plans were.

Many students with significant disabilities are never asked what they want to do after finishing school. They are slated for whatever program is available in their community. But expanded opportunities and experiences for students in inclusive schools can shift community expectations over time. In the past year, our community has added a program at a small liberal arts college for students with cognitive disabilities. My daughter's dreams may indeed lead to the reality of an authentic college experience after graduation.

6. *Are students supporting each other?*

One of the most under-utilized natural resources in any school is other students. Staff would not feel they had to "do it all" if students were more involved in cooperative learning and helping each other. And the pay-offs work both ways. Learning early how to work in teams and collaborate are invaluable skills for the world of adult work.

When my daughter was in seventh grade, she had trouble getting to different parts of the building on time. She was assigned a peer with a stop watch to "coach" her there in 60 seconds or less. Both kids

benefited: this peer who had struggled with behaviors in other contexts was now put into a leadership role and succeeded. My daughter had the natural support she needed so staff did not have to get involved and she now got to classes on time. Peers can check each other's work, coach kids or help them practice, assist with opening containers or sticking straws in milk bags at lunch, or help a child onto a school bus. The list is endless. Many kids want to help and enjoy being in a leadership role. Research studies have also shown that when students are intentionally paired with students who have significant disabilities during classtime and are given a supporting role, both students' engagement and learning improves (Carter & Kennedy, 2006).

7. *Does each member of the teaching team express ownership for all students?*

In inclusive schools, classrooms do not have a single teacher standing in front of the class all day. General and special educators, para-professionals, therapists, and others are all part of a team working fluidly throughout the day. In my daughter's middle school, two general educators and one special educator

worked together as a team supporting classes of 45 students. The time spent in large-group instruction was limited, with lots of small-group time. None of the students knew which teacher had special education training and which were general education teachers. A speech and language therapist came into class to help students prepare for oral presentations, work on language comprehension during reading instruction, and address other speech goals that were embedded into classroom instruction.

**Expanded opportunities and experiences for students in inclusive schools can shift community expectations over time.**

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There are times when a staff person, usually a paraprofessional, is assigned to a single student for safety or other specific concerns. However, paraprofessionals can and should more often be a resource for the entire class, not just for the assigned student. Research has shown that one-to-one paraprofessionals may actually inhibit student participation and engagement in class activities (Giangreco, et al., 2005). They also can unknowingly create barriers to social connections with other students. On the other hand, they also can be wonderful facilitators of relationships and interactions. If paraprofessionals are in classrooms, they should be circulating around and available to any student needing help. If that is not possible, at the very least they should avoid sitting right next to the student throughout lectures and discussions unless absolutely needed for specific academic assistance or to support challenging behavior.

### **In the School Building**

#### *1. Do all students feel they are part of a community?*

In order to learn, any child needs to feel they belong. Encouraging school staff to have all students participate across lessons and in all aspects of school life (e.g., sitting with other kids at lunch, playing with them at recess, joining extracurricular programs) sends the message that all students are valued members of the community. When students are ignored or not involved day-to-day, both they and their peers pick up messages about who is valued and who is not; who is expected to do well and who is not; who can participate and who cannot. As Dan Wilkins (n.d.) says, “Mainstreaming is like visiting. Inclusion is belonging.”

#### *2. Are related services integrated into regular activities throughout the school day?*

Students who are challenged by transitions, problems with attention/focus, or who have trouble sequencing find it particularly hard to be constantly pulled from the general education setting for specialized therapies and instruction. Instead, physical therapy can target motor skills at gym, at recess, and during hallway transitions. Occupational therapists can work in the classroom on handwriting or keyboarding or in art. Or, they can address sensory challenges during lunch or at recess. Speech can be integrated into the classroom to rehearse presentations or to work with a student during small group time to encourage participation, conversational turn-taking, voice volume, etc. Again, this support can benefit all students. An occupational therapist who worked with my daughter at writing time often helped other students with their penmanship or adjusted the keyboard for them during computer time. The speech therapist who helped my daughter prepare for presentations also worked with other students who needed extra coaching on public speaking. Every time a student is pulled from class for therapy, school staff should be weighing what that student is missing in the classroom and what extra burdens it puts on the student. For children who have trouble with abstract thinking and sequencing, this constant shuffling between adults can be especially challenging.

The logistics of integrating support services into classroom routines can be challenging. Building principals in my daughter’s schools have been key in helping staff develop their schedules and in allocating resources so educators and related staff can provide supports in meaningful ways. They have set aside planning time both for teams and school-wide to reflect on what works and improve areas of weakness. They also have



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clearly relayed the message to families and staff that IEP meetings and other planning time may need to be longer or include more staff for students with more complex needs. In some years, IEPs have included regular communication time with our family.

*3. Are all students actively encouraged to be part of and actually engaged in extracurriculars and social events at school?*

Too many times, students with disabilities are not part of the larger school life (Kleinert, Miracle, & Sheppard-Jones, 2007). Recall your own school experience—do you remember the fun of Friday night football games or what you learned in chemistry? After-school activities and other social events are where friendships are often cemented and where students with disabilities naturally build their social skills and independence. Consider every activity at school as a chance to involve students in learning opportunities, including after-school clubs, sports teams (maybe as a manager, equipment organizer or score-keeper), band, chorus, summer recreation, and other programs. Think about a particular student's interests and abilities to look for school opportunities where they can participate—not as a segregated or special experience, but alongside students without disabilities—such as the school store, cafeteria, stage crew for plays, or taking tickets or passing out programs at events. Plan these experiences and the goals students can work on in these settings into the IEP.

Students do not have to master every aspect of an activity to participate. During my daughter's freshman year in high school, her biology teacher encouraged her to join rocket club, which often attracts the most gifted math students. My daughter did not join be-

cause of math; she liked the idea of going to rocket launches and hanging out with her favorite teacher, who coached the team. The teacher welcomed her at club meetings and Saturday launches, but my daughter also built connections to other students through her regular attendance at club meetings and events.

*4. Does every student have opportunities to share his or her gifts, abilities, and passions?*

Everybody has at least one thing they either like or are good at. Is the school looking for ways to incorporate those things into the school day? We used to bring a revolving door of pets to school for hands-on demonstrations. This built relationships between my daughter and her classmates who loved animals. Now, both my daughters make jewelry. They have featured their work at a middle school talent night and at their high school Fine Arts Week.

Motivation is fundamental to effective learning. For children who have physical, cognitive or behavioral challenges, activities must be that much more motivating to encourage them to participate. It is important to capture what motivates a student in his or her IEP, so school staff can look for ways to incorporate those interests into school. My daughter likes frogs and toads, so her elementary school teachers gave her word problems involving frogs and toads to engage her. In high school, staff have offered art-related final projects as an option, knowing she is much more engaged when she can demonstrate what she learns through art.

**This support can benefit all students.**

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5. *Do IEP meetings actively involve students and include time to reflect on student success while incorporating student interests and strengths into the present level and goals?*

Students should have some way during the meeting to share their interests, favorites (e.g., subjects, activities, friends at school), least favorites, and what would help them learn. Some families put together a simple tip sheet for staff of accommodations, modifications and other strategies that have worked in the past. For example, my daughter likes working in small groups better than lectures and large group activities. She also needs larger print (14 pt. type) and will ask for it if simplified reading assignments are too small. All this information is described in her IEP's present level of educational performance.

Even younger children (age 7 or 8) can come to their IEP meeting for five minutes, say hi, introduce or acknowledge the people there, get an explanation about the meeting's purpose (e.g., planning for next school year), and share some of their work (e.g., drawings, written work). Classmates also can come to the first part of the meeting to share ideas and information. Peers often have creative thoughts about useful supports and strategies. Teachers and families can keep a portfolio of work throughout the year for reflection and to inform the IEP meeting.

Participating in IEP meetings helps students understand that the process is really about them and the supports to help them learn, not about paperwork and meetings. It also gives students an opportunity to showcase interests and abilities and make choices that strengthen self-determination skills. Fortunately, an increasing number of resources (e.g., Konrad, 2008; Van Dycke, Martin, & Lovett, 2006) and websites

(<http://www.studentledieps.org> and <http://www.nichcy.org/pubs/stuguide/st1book.htm>) are available to help equip students to participate meaningfully in the IEP process.

### **In the School District**

1. *Do the district's building principals understand and support inclusive principles?*

I am part of a local parent group (<http://madisonpartnersforinclusion.ning.com>) that has focused much of its advocacy effort on ensuring that new building principal hires support inclusive practices and have training and experience in inclusive schools. One of our core concerns in a diverse urban district with more than 50 schools has been that commitment to inclusion varies greatly from building to building, largely dependent on the principal. Building principals set the tone for their schools and hire both teachers and paraprofessionals who share their vision. If you want great staff, look for a great principal.

We encourage our members to ask to be on search committees for new principals and have worked with our district's human resources director to ensure that several questions on inclusive education are included in the principal interview hiring process. Our district's interview committees now also include at least several representatives from special education.

2. *Do school leaders provide the resources and flexibility necessary to support inclusive practices?*

Effective inclusive practices are both time and resource intensive. School leaders who understand the value of inclusion can find ways to support staff in their endeavors to connect with all learners. My daughter's middle school principal "cashed in" some of her paraprofessional supports in order to be able to hire additional special education staff.

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She then created three-member teaching teams that included two general educators and one “specialist”: either a special educator or English Language Learner professional. Every student in the building has daily access to a “specialist” for supports, even if the students themselves don’t realize it. The principal also created a 90-minute team planning window each week, allowing teams to develop modifications and target their strategies for specific learners. In my daughter’s high school, the science department has created a file folder over the years of accommodations and modifications that support students at several different reading levels and with various learning differences, so teachers don’t have to “recreate the wheel” each time a student with disabilities is in the class.

3. *Do school leaders see how inclusive practices fit into overall school improvement and school redesign efforts?*

This year an assistant principal invited me to be part of our high school’s School Improvement Plan team. The first goal suggestion came from general education teachers wanting more strategies and resources on differentiating classes for their diverse learners, including students with disabilities. The principal running the meeting immediately saw the value of engaging more students with disabilities in a wider array of coursework as a way to contribute toward overall school improvement. Likewise, many of the more flexible strategies that have engaged my daughter in her high school classes and allowed for more meaningful participation (small-group work, more projects and fewer

tests, a range of final project options) have come not from the special education department, but as part of a high school redesign grant designed to improve outcomes in urban schools and engage a wider array of learners in a rigorous, relevant curriculum. School leaders are increasingly seeing that many of the flexible strategies used for students who are at risk of dropping out or becoming disengaged in school also work well for students with disabilities.

In examining the elements of authentic inclusion, it is clear that what is effective for students with disabilities often benefits *all* students. All students need opportunities to engage, experiment, and share their strengths; a welcoming attitude from school staff and other students; and some individualization of content to meet their learning needs. However, inclusive practices are not necessarily easy, inexpensive or even highly valued in this era of academic accountability focusing so heavily on standardized test scores. To be effective, inclusive practices require intent, planning, teaming, creativity, and support from leadership. When schools commit to inclusive practices, they are providing the structures, supports, and expectations that help all students reach their maximum potential. Perhaps more importantly, they are creating an environment where students and families feel welcome, safe, and valued and—at the same time—set an important example for the larger community on the importance of everyone having a valued role and making a contribution.

**Even younger children can come to their IEP meeting for five minutes, say hi, introduce or acknowledge the people there, get an explanation about the meeting’s purpose, and share some of their work.**

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